CALIFORNIA CLERGY CHALLENGE INDONESIAN TRADE OFFICIALS

By Anne Treseder

A group of six San Francisco Bay Area priests and ministers, citing their moral duty to speak on behalf of the silenced and vulnerable people of East Timor, were "uninvited guests" on Thursday, May 18, when high-level Indonesian trade officials presented a "Forum on Business Opportunities with Indonesia."

Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian clergy, along with their lay supporters, converged on the San Francisco Hilton Hotel, where the Forum was held, and passed out information about the illegal Indonesian occupation of East Timor to over one hundred Forum participants, who included American businesspeople interested in investing in Indonesia, Indonesian government officials, and representatives from Indonesian private industry.

The clergy--members of East Timor Religious Outreach--warned Forum participants that "Indonesia wants you to do business in their country, but they don't want you to know . . [that] the Indonesian government of General Suharto is one of the world's most brutal and corrupt military dictatorships." In a leaflet, they told of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the genocide committed there by the Indonesian military.

The clergy also handed out a grim, first-hand report of life in East Timor under Indonesian occupation.

One pastor participating in the action described the Indonesian reaction to their presence as one of shock and confusion. "They had hoped to spend the day soliciting American investments," he said. "They hadn't expected to be confronted with the truth about their government's behavior in East Timor, especially by a group of American clergypeople!"

The clergy were able to distribute educational materials to Forum participants for over twenty minutes before furious Indonesian officials were able to regain their composure and summon hotel security personnel. The clergy left politely when requested to do so, but continued to pass out information at the hotel entrance, under the angry gaze of Indonesian consulate officials.

Meanwhile, at the Forum inside the hotel, Indonesian trade representatives distributed brochures about land in East Timor available for agricultural investment. "I was shocked," said one San Francisco businessman who attended the conference. "I wondered how many Timorese had been forcibly moved off their land in order to make it available for outside investment."

Rev. John Chamberlin of San Francisco explained why he and

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other religious had tried to remind Forum participants of the brutal truth about East Timor. "As clergy and people of conscience, we owe it to the Timorese to speak out and bear witness to their suffering," he said. "The Indonesian government should not be permitted to conduct 'business as usual' in the United States while they continue to conduct slaughter in East Timor."

Chamberlin urged people in the U.S., and around the world, to refuse to do business with Indonesia until East Timor is free.

-- San Francisco
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